

**Philosophy:
Wit, Wonder, And Wisdom
Presidential Address**

Richard M. Owsley

The occasions which stimulate philosophical investigations are both conventional and surprising. Wonder, doubt, despair, and perplexity are said to be the dispositions which trigger the pursuit of wisdom. To the classical Greeks philosophy is the basis and the result of wondrous speculation. The subject of such speculation (the world, mortality, and the gods) changes, but wonder remains constant. The satisfaction of curiosity, the product of wonder, is the root and the source of perennial philosophy. Aristotle and the sophists also suggest a practical kind of wisdom for exploring concrete issues. The areas of politics, ethics, economics, and the arts present situations for which deliberate thinking is required. John Dewey and the pragmatists continue this so-called practical tendency. Descartes' *Meditations* in the seventeenth century began with doubt not wonder. His approach is negative *vis a vis* the Greeks and the pragmatists. Existential philosophers—ancient, modern, and contemporary—dwell upon despair, anxiety, or dread as the attitude peculiar to a philosopher. In this paper I suggest that, in addition to the above motives, wit, humor, mirth, amusement, jocularly, and the comic are a family of dispositions from which philosophy emerges. I use the term “humor” to cover the varieties of ways in which this disposition shows itself. The behavioral result of humor is laughter. I ask myself, and I am inviting you to join in the query: “What have humor and laughter to do with philosophy?” And in turn, “What has philosophy to do with them?”

Samuel Johnson, according to an acquaintance, was once told by a neighbor, “You are a philosopher. I have tried in my time, too, to be a philosopher but I don't know how. Cheerfulness was always breaking through.” The implication is that philosophy and humor are incompatible. Philosophy is a serious endeavor, humor is frivolous, so they are mutually exclusive.

If philosophy is seen merely as a series of jokes or as examples of absurdity and ridiculousness, it deserves to be treated irreverently. Whether pursued in the study, in the library, or in the classroom, philosophical assertions or conclusions which strike one as “great fun” are likely to impede the reflective process. Those of us who teach philosophy have long recognized that when students make light of philosophical texts, terminology, issues, or problems, these students become virtually unteachable. Although wit may be used to combat the difficulty, the pain, and

the boredom of traditional philosophical discussions, one risks trivialization or degradation by its use. Aristotle recognizes the pitfalls of attempting to mix philosophy with humor when he says, "The ridiculous ... is a species of the ugly; it may be defined as a mistake or unseemliness ..." The deliberate use of devices to achieve humor ignores philosophy's primary task: the pursuit of truth. Cicero, the rhetorician, outlines the difference between laughing and truth-seeking. He writes, "We expect one thing and another is said; here our disappointed expectation makes us laugh." The disappointment of expecting a truth to appear, and for it not to do so, is neither amusing to the rhetorician nor to the philosopher. Aristotle, Cicero, and others are also aware that humor and the resultant laughter can be cruel and unfeeling as well as unthinking. Cicero adds, "Neither great vice, such as that of a crime, nor great misery is a fit subject for ridicule and laughter." Witty sarcasm, however amusing, used by the teacher or the author to put down a student or a reader contributes little to a dialogue. Despite some counter examples in Plato's dialogues, bitter humor is an ingredient which curtails the meaningful flow of thinking and thought.

Despite the warnings concerning the disadvantages of laughter for the philosophical enterprise, some advantages must be considered also. The relaxed atmosphere of a humorous discussion, spiced with mirthful metaphors, striking allusions, contrasts and coincidences, often adds to a philosophical investigation rather than threatens it. Wit in writing, in lecture, or in conversation can be healthy rather than neurotic, stimulating rather than boring, and convivial rather than isolating. The effect of laughter is at times delightful. Even the sober and stodgy Immanuel Kant asserts, "Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing." Such expectation and disappointment may be enlightening, intriguing, and humbling. When Voltaire's *Candide* expects Leibniz's "best of all possible worlds" and instead finds natural, social, and psychological calamities, the philosophical reader must smile in sympathy. Likewise, when F.S.C. Schiller announces that the next page in a manuscript will illustrate F.H. Bradley's Absolute and the page is blank, this is constructive humor. So are Lewis Carroll's many fascinating logical absurdities in the *Alice* stories. Sigmund Freud acknowledges this fascination. In his essay, "Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious," he asserts, "[W]it and the comic ... ha[ve] in [them] a liberating element ... [They are] also something fine and elevated." The challenge of philosophy, serious though it is, when met with disappointment has a comic effect.

According to proverbial advice, young instructors of philosophy are admonished to (1) dress appropriately; (2) proceed fairly and conscientiously; and (3) use witticisms, amusing stories, jokes, and comic situations sparingly. When Cicero writes, "There are two kinds of jokes: One of which is based on things, the other on words," he left an opening for the would-be instructor/comedian to engage in

irrelevant word-play. Such an instructor who introduces the pre-Socratics with "Thales, the first philosopher, is all wet" or that Aristotle carried the golden mean to extremes can expect only groans from his students. The modern counterpart, who playfully admonishes her students not to put "Descartes before the horse," risks obfuscation. The suggested intolerable obscenities based on Robert Grosseteste's name add little to a presentation. In the same vein are the many variations of the Cartesian formula – "I think therefore I am" to "I sit therefore I am" or "I run therefore I am" or "(choose another verb) therefore I am." To designate Socrates a "cave dweller," to assert "The English have a Locke on empiricism," or to sum up the mind/body problem as "No matter, never mind" can be equally unproductive. The teacher of American philosophy who asserts, "He who steals my Peirce steals trash," brings smiles, perhaps a few guffaws, but very little insight. Moreover, to assert that Jane Russell is the illegitimate daughter of Bertrand Russell or that the writers William James and Henry James had two younger siblings, Frank and Jesse, who moved west and took up another calling, is equally unjustifiable. The examples of irony in Plato, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger compare favorably with the feeble examples cited above. But in many cases such ironies add not a whit to the argument.

Attempts to explain humor are contained within the theories and hypotheses of psychologists, sociologists, historians, and linguists. Philosophers have added their own ideas, but often they have merely repeated insights from other disciplines. There are, however, strictly philosophical accounts of humor and laughter. Each of the four main divisions of the philosophical enterprise – ontology, axiology, logic, and pragmatics – contains areas of such explanations. Still, few would contend that any single theory is complete.

Humorous situations occur as ontological when the levels or kinds of *being* are confused or transposed. When a fault, in the geological sense, becomes apparent to the surprise of the viewer, ambiguity is relieved by laughter. Santayana writes of this experience, "The most conspicuous headings under which comic effects are gathered are perhaps incongruity and degradation." When one apparently dwells in one realm of the universe of discourse, and this realm proves to be of another sort, the result is humorous amazement. Gleeful wonderment appears with the unexpected, the inappropriate, and the incongruous. Each philosopher, including Santayana in his skeptical phase, assumes that he/she can distinguish by thought experiment the realms of truth, essence, and/or matter. To treat any one realm as if it is another is frustrating, surprising, and amusing all at the same time. Edmund Husserl's technique of imaginative variation deliberately seeks ontological interplay. Kierkegaard writes, "The matter is quite simple. The comical is present in every stage of life for wherever there is life there is contradiction. And wherever there is contradiction the comical is present." Kierkegaard alludes to something

more than the merely verbal.

Henri Bergson, in his book *Laughter*, accounts for the phenomenon of laughter through the ambiguity of a confusion of the categories. His primary example is the purposeful confusing and interchanging of organic life with inorganic mechanisms. Noting cinematic animation, Bergson observes how humans become filled with mirth watching lines, shapes, and colors behave as if they are ensouled creatures. Likewise, vital entities rigid to the point of inflexibility are funny. He gives a peculiarly French example:

A man running along the street stumbles and falls. The passers by burst out laughing. They would not laugh at him, I imagine, could they suppose that the whim had suddenly seized him to sit upon the ground. They laugh because his sitting down is involuntary ... as a result in fact of rigidity or momentum.

Bergson labels this robotic behavior as "mechanical inelasticity." Ontologically reflective human beings laugh (according to Bergson) at oddities, deformities, temporal breaks, and shifts in the orders of appearance because ontological misfits are subject to ridicule. Albert Camus recommends relaxed toleration to overcome frustration related to the absurdities inherent in the cosmos, society, and human relations. In a materialistic world, where atoms and elements care neither for human needs nor human wants, such relaxation is a pre-requisite. (Democritus, one of the original materialists, is thus called the laughing philosopher.) Linguistic, political, and economical configurations are for the most part ridiculous hence laughable. The many human relations which make little sense are relieved by amusements. Similarly philosophers are amused when a supposedly closely ordered idealistic system proves to be neither closed, systematic, nor orderly. Disorder and confusion are only tolerable when one can laugh at these absurdities.

Humor has an axiological dimension as well as an ontological one. The striving of individuals and groups to recognize and to realize positive values while denying negative ones is universal. Nonetheless, this process is often accompanied by disappointment, conflict, and/or boredom. Values are never completely under the control of the human will. Thus, the inept individual and the outsider become prime subjects for ridicule. Members of a given group or social class find the activities of non-members especially ridiculous. The spontaneous jokes of a given nation, society, or clique deride the food habits, sexual practices, habitual postures, and speech patterns of "others." Satirists – the Roman, Juvenal; the eighteenth century Englishman, Jonathan Swift; or the contemporary, Tom Wolfe – make fun of the misfit. They do so to punish, mildly or severely, those who veer from the norm – especially if the deviant is one who sets the standards. Stereo-

types are material for jokes, comic narratives, and lampoon skits. To the nineteenth century Southern white planter, the speech and activities of black slaves were hilarious. In this present century, black comedians have turned the tables. To the New Englander, the crudities of the frontiersman are likewise occasions for comedy. The reverse is also true. The rough cowboy portrays the elite New Englander as silly. The outsider is always ridiculous. The miser, the drunkard, the glutton, the hypocrite, and the sexual athlete are stock figures over which the righteous guffaw. In many instances, the mere presence of stock characters brings laughter. These conditions are well known in Plautus, Moliere, Shakespeare, and Shaw. To the philosophical specialist in values, rebelling against the prevailing mores is both threatening and comic. That a plurality of differences may be productive is a rational achievement; distortions, deformities, or degradations are difficult to tolerate but not impossible. Within a rational value hierarchy the anarchist, the skeptic, and even the nihilist need not be ridiculed into absolute submission. Value authorities, when reflective and tolerant, can accept deviancy, disturbance, and upheaval as teaching examples. It is comedy which allows such authorities to become tolerant even at the expense of being lampooned themselves. The same authorities are potential target of comedy. Aristotle thus recognizes comedy as a philosophical corrective: "Some mistake or some turpitude without grievous pain need not be very pernicious or destructive." Any harmless peccadillo, when made a cause for merriment, is transformed into a cathartic tool. Descartes, however, warns of the extremity of this condition:

We notice that people with very obvious defects such as those who are lame, blind of eye, hunchbacked, or who have received some public insult are especially given to [practice] mockery [themselves]; for desiring to see all others held in as low estimation as themselves, they are truly rejoiced at the evils which befall them [their adversaries] and they hold the[ir adversaries] deserving of these.

The resentment of some can lead to a black humor which, while corrective, is hardly harmless. A value theorist, not in the rationalist tradition, may find Descartes' super-rational pre-suppositions ludicrous. Descartes' facile conclusion seems to confirm the generalization that those unlike ourselves are defective, hence ludicrous. Satiric comedy, based on resentment, is softened by insight. The philosopher of values is constructive when she uses humor to balance conflicts among ideas, ideologies, and life-styles. In so far as humorous exchanges can replace attacks and retaliations, the promise of reconciliation among values is present.

Despite its widespread reputation as a dull discipline, logic can be a source of merriment as well as prosaic proof. The word play involved in informal fallacies is

both delightful and instructive. Equivocation, ambiguity, and amphibole have long served the purposes of comedy writers. Formally valid syllogisms the content of which is incongruous are a ready made repository for puns and suggestive metaphors. Incongruities of classification and of thought sequences are the bases of most (dirty) jokes. Santayana, with a reserved respect for formal logic, summarizes his response to logical inconsistencies:

Certain crude and obvious cases of the comic seem to consist of little more than shock or surprise: a pun is a sort of jack in the box popping up from nowhere into our plodding thoughts ... There is something inherently vulgar about it; perhaps because our turn of thought cannot be very entertaining in itself ... We are so glad to break in upon it with irrelevant nullities...

Mrs. Malaprop, who interposed adjectives, illustrates Santayana's vulgarity.

A philosophical use of humor often has ethical overtones. Judgments about persons when compared to stated and unstated ideals can be pathetic as well as humorous. Those who attempt accomplishments beyond their capacities appear ludicrous even to themselves. Santayana asserts that an "undertone of disgust mingles with other amusing surprises ... when a dignified person slips ... " Thus when the carpenter's door does not fit or the supposedly repaired electronic gadget still does not function, laughter ensues. Every human aspiration is vulnerable. Both the toddling child and the drunkard who stumble and lurch are objects of mirth. The ape who futilely mimics humans - Kafka's "Member of the Academy" - demonstrates this comic principle also. Even when laughter has a hollow ring it can relieve tension. Causation, challenged by Hume, results in an insecurity the aspects of which can be amusing. Life is seldom smooth, harmonious, and satisfying. Santayana asserts, "Something analogous to humor can appear in plastic forms and we call it the grotesque." Manifestations of the grotesque inevitably appear in the gap between aspiration and actuality. The human condition, a cause for embarrassment, is made bearable by laughter.

The essence of humor for philosophers falls under three rubrics. Each rubric presents a particular benefit for the philosopher. These benefits are (1) a sense of superiority; (2) a method for adjustment; (3) catharsis. One who laughs according to the first theory does so out of a feeling of superiority. According to Thomas Hobbes, this felt superiority is of many kinds. One laughs at the miser when one does not feel the need to pinch and save, at the hypocrite when the laugher perceives herself as honest, and at the hen-pecked husband when one does not see himself as dominated. A pie throwing incident is funny when the laugher's face drips no custard. When one's own condition compares favorably with the infirmi-

ties or deformities of others, the condescension shows itself as laughter. Hobbes asserts:

Sudden glory is the passion which makes those grimaces called laughter ... the apprehension of some deformed thing in another by a comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves ... [There is] triumph when we laugh.

Hobbes pushes his example quite far: At a funeral ceremony, the apparent mourners inwardly rejoice at the life which they retain but which the deceased has lost.

To acknowledge that any enterprise can fail, that any ambition become thwarted, that any goal can collapse, or that any process can be interrupted, leads to despair or, with detachment, to laughter. To recognize that prized values may prove unattainable, hollow, and/or ultimately undesirable, brings an enlightened smile. That other human beings may be taken in by a shoddy life-plan while "I cannot" is occasion for rejoicing. Both the Stoic and the Epicurean accept humor as a crucial ingredient of education.

To most philosophers, humor is equated with acceptance. Thus, Kant's "strained expectation" demonstrates philosophic wisdom. Lucretius used humor and irony to neutralize religious threats. Philosophies laugh at human foibles, physical calamities, and psychic dependencies on their way to wisdom. Incongruities, surprises, anti-climaxes, and inconsistencies must inevitably characterize one's life as a reflective philosopher. When the philosopher learns to say with Samuel Butler that "God and the Devil are a division of labor," then initiatives of any deity or higher power need not disturb the seeker's tranquility. The world is free of harassment when laughter deactivates divine, natural, or human threats. A tranquil courage is achieved in the face of adversity as when Oscar Wilde informs his British captors: "If this is the way the queen treats her convicts, she doesn't deserve to have any." Laughter then makes bearable suffering, struggle, competition, pain, and death.

Comedy encourages and comforts, liberates and provides catharsis. Those who laugh are purged of negativism, crudity, cruelty, anxiety, discomfort, and frustration. This catharsis drains negative energy and puts in place a positive acceptance. In this way, humor helps all classes. The bourgeoisie is aided in the pursuit of family love, sexual satisfaction, health, and the acquisition of economic resources. The proletariat is supported with a greater strength to bear the circumstances of poverty and oppression on the way to the free gifts of life. And the aristocracy is confirmed through laughter in a sense of superiority, achievement, and *raison d'être*. Bemused philosophers can teach each group to grow within and beyond the bounds of their type. For each and every one of us regardless of class, condition, or situa-

